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ADOLESCENT MORAL DELINQUENCY AND THE ATTAINMENT OF SOCIAL VALUES

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The purpose of this paper is to discuss the attainment by the individual of those social and moral values which give him his character and his attitude toward life as a whole. The facts indicate that in adolescence the individual goes through a rather definite process in forming his ethical standards, a process marked by a breaking up of the old, a trial and reorganization, and finally by the attainment of the standard of his group.

There are several lines of evidence which indicate that adolescent development has the general character mentioned above. Professor Marro in his work *La Puberte* reports the following: Observations were made in

Italy on the conduct of 3,012 secondary students, and the conduct of 70 per cent was reported "good" at eleven years of age, of 54 per cent at fourteen, and 74 per cent at eighteen. Plotting these figures, Professor Marro obtains a curve like that given herewith. Interpreting this curve, we note comparatively good conduct (Fig. 1) in the period immediately preceding

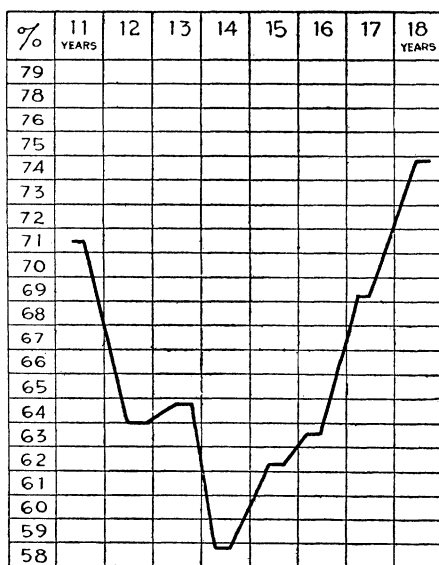


FIG. 1.—(After Marro)

¹ Mr. Giles, late principal of the DeKalb Township High School, died Sept. 4, 1916.

adolescence, the period of imposed morality; a decided falling off in the character of the conduct from that time until the age of fifteen years, the period of trial; and then the beginning of a rise which does not end until a higher point is reached at the age of eighteen years than was had at eleven, this point being the attainment of control.

In order to compare these figures with those of an American high school, the writer kept, for a period of four years, a record of the students requiring discipline. The aggregate number of boys observed was 687, of girls, 767. The figures given in Tables I and II were obtained. Plotting these figures we get the curves

TABLE I

BOYS

Age	Number Observed	Number Classed as Good or Not Requiring Discipline	Percentage of Those Classed as Good
13.....	52	47	90
14.....	140	114	81
15.....	163	137	84
16.....	121	85	70
17.....	79	58	73
18.....	45	38	84
19.....	18	15	83

TABLE II

GIRLS

Age	Number Observed	Number Classed as Good or Not Requiring Discipline	Percentage of Those Classed as Good
13.....	67	64	95
14.....	179	170	94
15.....	212	196	92
16.....	170	159	93
17.....	99	85	85
18.....	24	22	91
19.....	7	7	100

of Figs. 2 and 3, which we note to be in general the same as Professor Marro's, although in most cases we should probably have to

allow about two years for the later development in this country as compared with Italy.

I think that from these statistics we may assume an analogous development for many individuals. We may outline this development as follows: fairly good conduct in the lull preceding adolescence because of undeveloped powers; then, at adolescence, a breaking away from restraint, and a trying out of the new-felt

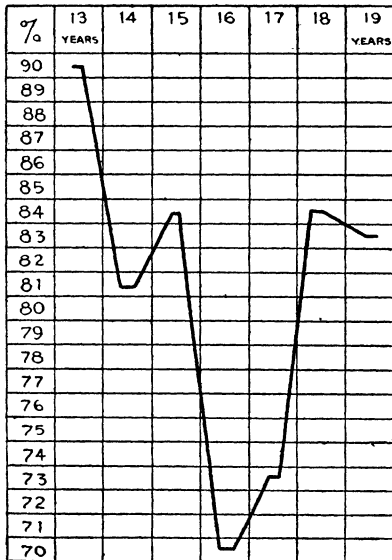


FIG. 2.—Curve based on observations in the DeKalb Township High School. Percentages are of those classed as "good."

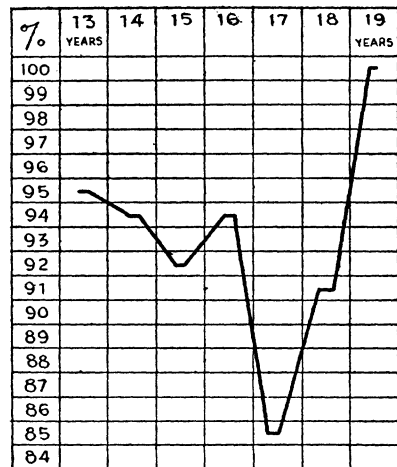


FIG. 3.—Curve showing observations on high-school girls for four years. At each age the number of girls was taken and the number not requiring discipline.

powers in many new directions and combinations. But as the consequences of the acts develop and their meaning becomes clear, the evil acts, one by one, are given up or reformed. Thus, as time goes on, a larger and larger part of the individual's life becomes moralized, and a larger and larger proportion of his acts are classed by observers as "good," until we find that at eighteen he has raised his moral standards approximately to those of the group of which he is a member. And the standard reached is not only

nearer that of the society about him than that which he had attained at twelve years of age, but is also more real, because it has been worked out through experience. It is no longer a formal, but a voluntary, acceptance of certain boundaries within which his life must go. The adolescent has passed out of the Garden of Eden through eating of the fruit of knowledge and has become one of us, knowing good and evil.

On the other hand, we find some individuals of the type who, because they live in a community of low ideals where evil acts are approved, or because even in a higher community they fail to respond to social pressure, form their lives on a low standard. These latter persist in evil actions that the group disapproves of, and try to avoid the consequences of them by deceit, concealment, or force. Such individuals take a standard for life below the community level. From the point of view of society they are the moral failures. In other words, the period of trial is also a period for making delinquents. If the result of the period of trial is immoral, we have the confirmed criminal formed. Yet it seems that in a normal environment, with a careful attention to discipline and guidance, practically all individuals are brought to the social standard.

This assumption of an analogous development for individuals, drawn from Professor Marro's statistics, is borne out by observations in several directions. In the lower years of high school there is a larger amount of spontaneous disorder, unprepared lessons, truancy, etc., than in the later years. Yet the disorder is of a temporary character and usually easily handled; and in most cases the individuals reported become manly, dependable students. That is, the "immorality" was but a temporary phase in their development. On the other hand, when boys in the later years are reported for similar delinquencies, it too frequently means that there is a settled attitude toward unsocial conduct, that is very difficult to eradicate. The individual has developed an unsocial view of life that makes him an evil influence in the school.

Juvenile delinquency furnishes further material which throws light on the growth of character. As is well known, delinquency, according to the statistics of the United States census, increases

threefold in the period from eleven to fifteen years of age, and then again decreases rapidly. The figures are 466 cases at ten years of age, 2,150 cases at fourteen, and 309 cases at nineteen. In *Man and Abnormal Man, Including a Study of Children* (Government Printing Office, 1905), Mr. MacDonald gives the proportion of criminals per 1,000,000 of the population as follows:

TABLE III

Under 12 years old.....	24
12 to 16 " "	261
16 to 21 " "	321
21 to 30 " "	245
30 to 40 " "	204
40 to 50 " "	143
50 to 60 " "	92
Over 60 " "	56

This places the largest proportion of criminals in the years 16 to 21. Further, the number of delinquents sent to reform and industrial schools is largest among boys and girls fourteen and fifteen years old and decreases from that age very rapidly.

The census of 1890 (p. 569, in a report on "Juvenile Crime") shows the following summary:

Truancy greatest at thirteen years of age—run away from authority.
 Incorrigibility greatest at fourteen years of age—rebel at authority.
 Petit larceny greatest at fifteen years of age.
 Larceny }
 Burglary } greatest at sixteen years of age.
 Intoxication }
 Fornication greatest at seventeen years of age.

In the same census (p. 566) is found Table IV showing the distribution of ages in juvenile reformatories of the United States.

In the report of the International Congress on Hygiene, Sikorski gives the types of children difficult to handle, and in Table V shows the percentage of those requiring discipline at different ages.

Sikorski says that the greatest number of these difficult children are found between the ages of thirteen and sixteen. "After seventeen years almost all bad subjects correct themselves."

Pointing in the same direction as the facts given above are the reports of a number of parents that, in each case, their boy was "so good" until about eleven or twelve years old—stayed in eve-

TABLE IV

Age	Male	Female
7 years.....	63	27
8 ".....	143	59
9 ".....	260	78
10 ".....	466	116
11 ".....	265	127
12 ".....	1,182	189
13 ".....	1,478	290
14 ".....	1,769	381
15 ".....	1,751	466
16 ".....	1,626	543
17 ".....	921	480
18 ".....	420	234
19 ".....	213	96
20 ".....	103	57
21 ".....	25	15

nings, studied his lessons, ran errands, etc.—but now, when fourteen or fifteen, they can do so little with him; he is unruly, irresponsible, and shiftless. Yet these boys later worked out a manly moral standard for their lives.

Years of Age	TABLE V	Percentage
11½.....		2.5
12.....		6.1
13.....		23.7
14.....		20.0
15.....		21.0
16.....		6.2
17.....		1.2

As is well known, owners of shops in which careful and exact work is required are loath to employ boys between fourteen and sixteen years of age, because in this period they are careless and indifferent toward their work. This attitude in boys and the change later on would be explained by the theory of break-up given above. And this break-up comes sharply to the front when the conditions in the home or surroundings are lax.

The smaller number of girls going through this period of trying out needs some comment. The less trying out found among girls would indicate that they do less exploring morally than boys. They accept the standards of society more readily. This may be because society holds them more strictly to account for any deviation from social standards—even minor ones—and visits a heavier punishment upon them, so that long submission has produced less tendency to try out; or it may be that woman is less given to variation than man—morally as well as physically—is more given to upholding the accepted rights and traditions than man. Her morality is thus more conventional and less a matter of experience and trial. Thus we should expect to find it less secure in some ways than man's. And statistics seem to indicate this; for we find the percentage of women criminals per 1,000,000 of the population increases up to sixty years. And in Italy the period of the greatest number of females is ten years later than that of men.

So much for the trial period of adolescence. A most important fact for the changed attitude later in adolescence comes from the study of adolescent conversion. The statistics collected by Starbuck and Coe show the well-known fact that sixteen and four-tenths years is the age of the greatest number of conversions. Does this fact not reinforce the figures of Marro, and—allowing a year or thereabouts for the earlier maturity of Italian youth—does it not indicate a change in the life of adolescents in general about this time, and their readiness to remodel their lives on the basis of the society about them, thus, in a religious atmosphere, to take the religious viewpoint as a guide for life? This change marks a new attitude toward life. No longer is the adolescent an explorer charting unknown seas, or an Ishmaelite, his hand against established convention; he has accepted definite standards for his life and will give them a trying out before he breaks away again. And as the fixity of habit settles down upon him and responsibilities increase, the chances are less and less that he will break away.

An important inference from the point of view of discipline and government in the home and school is that an unsocial action has a very different meaning for the observer and therefore should be handled differently according as it occurs in the period previous

to sixteen years of age or subsequent to it. In the former case it nearly always is simply an isolated trying out of a course of action because it seems attractive; the act is not a part of a scheme of life, and there is not much thought of results. When the consequences are pointed out, and social pressure is brought to bear, there is usually a ready abandonment of the attitude. In the latter period of adolescence unsocial action too often means, not the spontaneous carelessness of earlier years, but either a failure of the individual to conform his life to fairly well-known standards—that is, weakness on his part—or a more or less settled unsocial attitude toward life taken in the belief that such an attitude is the

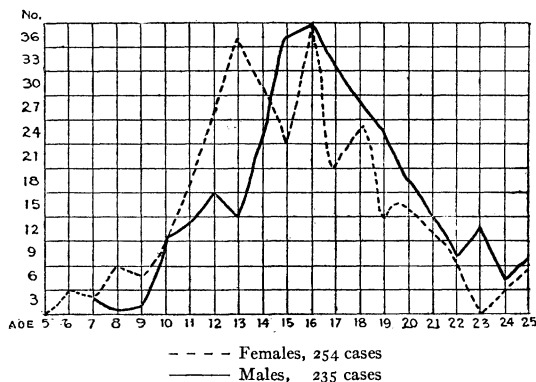


FIG. 4.—Curve showing age of conversion. (After Starbuck, *Psychology of Religion*.)

clever, pleasurable, or advantageous thing to do. There has been a fixing of the ideals along unsocial lines. Under such conditions one will have to work long and patiently either to establish a better control or to break up the unsocial attitude; for the individual will slip back under temptation or whenever he thinks he can escape detection.

There is, in this law of adolescent moral development, this further note of encouragement for those parents who are alarmed and apprehensive over the loss of moral tone in their boys and girls during the early period of adolescence, namely, that the attitude is a temporary one and will, with proper training and surroundings,

work off, and the individual will come to himself and to the standards of his group. At the same time the other aspect of the process is to be remembered, that the period is an exceedingly critical one for the individual, for he is working out the standards by which he is to guide his life for the years to come, and there is the possibility that he may, in the strife of truth and falsehood, choose the evil side. Thus every care and endeavor should be used to bring about the choice of the desired standards. For the choice once made is in all probability final.

The problem of the first period of adolescence is one of trial and discovery; the essential problem of the second period is one of control of the newly discovered self, and this problem often lasts until well on into mature life, and in some cases is not solved at all. After the adolescent has found out his talents, his likes, and his possibilities, his test, so far as manhood is concerned, has really just begun. The problem hitherto has been one of seeking new activities, enjoying them, and measuring himself in them. And the danger is that the individual will continue unstable and a seeker for pleasure; will, in other words, make pleasure the end of his planning. The real test now is, having measured himself somewhat and having some realization of an ideal to which he would aspire, can he bring himself under control and make real this ideal? To do this he must change from feeling to intellect as the guide of life. The statistics of social hygiene and dissipation show either the low ideals prevailing, or extreme lack of control among the young manhood of the nation. The youth should be taught that the test of himself, after having "felt the bite of full-bodied desire," is whether he can live up to an ideal of clean, hardy manhood, and that the test of our nation is whether we can make this ideal prevail. This is the problem of moral education in adolescence.

Schematically, then, the progress in the development of the individual during adolescence is as follows: There is a lull physically in the years immediately preceding adolescence, with fairly good conduct; but with the increase in strength and the impulsion of new-felt powers—mental and physical—the growth of sex, etc., there comes a general revolt against restraint. In this period so

much of the petty stealing, truancy, etc., occurs. And here is the critical period which lasts until moral values are established. Then there is a division into two groups: the class which solves the problem of control and organizes life on social lines, and another class the members of which for reasons of environment or heredity follow the path of desire, delinquency, and crime. We may say summarily that the problem of education in the adolescent period is to provide an environment wherein the individual can find sufficient freedom to try out his social impulses, and yet an environment so organized that he shall not take a distinctly unsocial or immoral combination of them. The aim of the parent should be to keep the suggestions of the home life and the associates of such a character that the solution is the one socially desired. The meaning to the individual of this period of trial and choice is to make the character which is finally worked out the result of real effort and personal choice. Only so could a character be developed. Finally the period has a racial meaning as well, in that it offers opportunity for the variation that makes changes in established custom possible.

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